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NEWS

High school gym project moves forward, Town Meeting could see library funding in fall

CHRIS STEVENS | CORRESPONDENT

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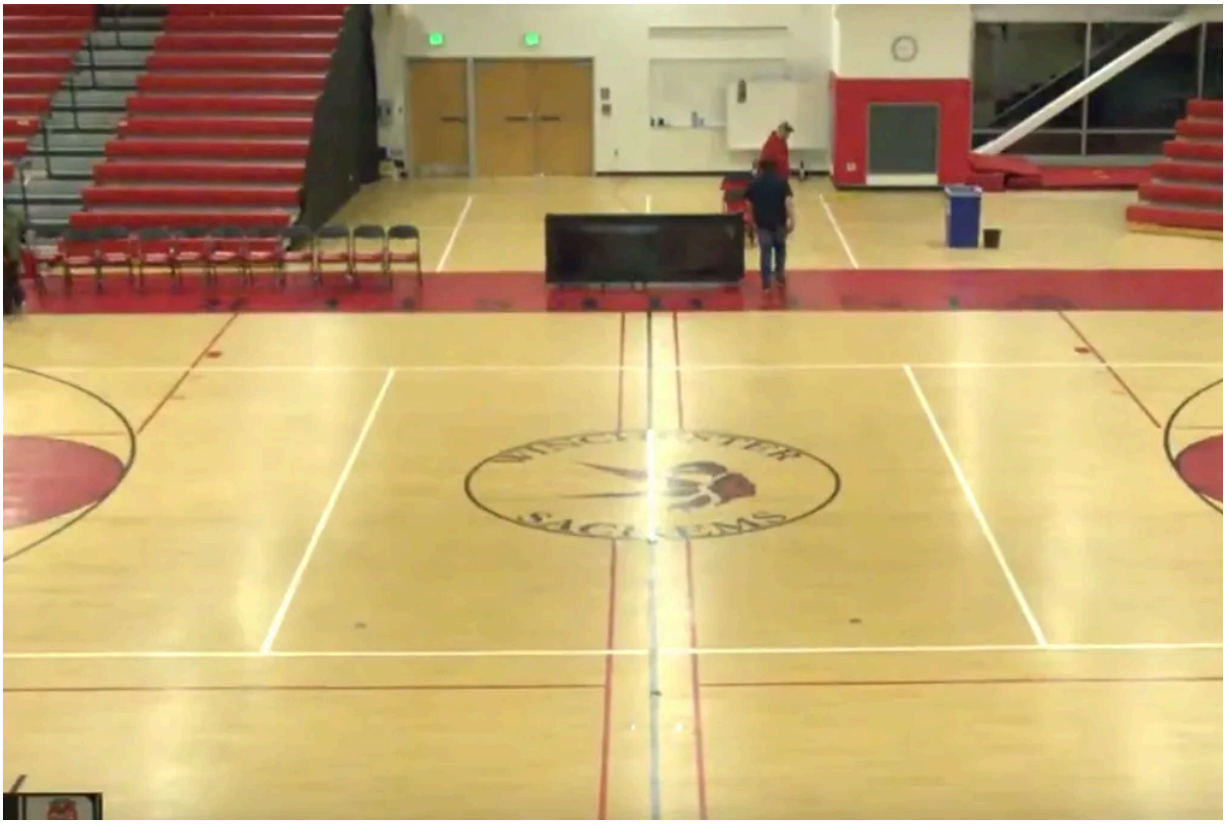

The town is moving forward with the Winchester High School gym floor renovation and reconfiguration project. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

A plan for a new high school gym floor took another step forward when the Select Board unanimously threw its support behind the

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"I fully support this project as I have for several months," said Select Board Chair Richard Mucci at the Feb. 12 meeting. "It's just something we should get done as soon as possible because it really is a hazard at this time for all the athletes that use it."

Tackling the $2.5 million Winchester High School gym floor renovation and reconfiguration project was raised during the Select Board's Feb. 5 meeting after Town Manager Beth Rudolph confirmed the Board of Assessors had released $960,000 in overlay money.

The cost includes not only redoing the gym floor, but replacing athletic equipment, new bleachers and turning the orientation of the gym 90 degrees, among other items.

A brief history

After seeing a lot of online chatter and hearing some frustration since the Feb. 5 meeting, School Committee member Chris Nixon offered to answer the question as to why the gym floor was not included in the original high school renovation plans.

"Believe it or not, we were invited into the feasibility on the high school almost 14 years ago and when we were invited the floor was actually four and half years old so it was basically a new floor," he explained.

Nixon said by the time the Massachusetts School Building Authority green lighted the renovation plan the floor was seven and half years old and in "pretty decent shape." But by 2017, School Athletic Director Marc Arria started reaching out to flooring contractors. Nixon said even then it was more with an eye on space reconfiguration than flooring.

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"Then COVID happened … everyone's attention got redirected when that happened," he said.

Nixon said no one was "asleep at the switch" in regards to the project and if COVID hadn't happened, the gym floor and room reconfiguration might very well have been completed by now.

He added that if it should come to pass that the floor is replaced over the summer, they will have gotten 19 years out of it "which is pretty incredible." He said 15 years is the typical lifespan of a gym floor.

But how to fund it?

Select Board members also agreed on a funding strategy that included using $1.3 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds (ARPA), federal aid that was distributed to communities in the wake of COVID-19, as well as the $960,000 in overlay money. Board members agreed to ask Town Meeting in the spring to cover the $340,000 gap with free cash.

Board member John Fallon said that while the Capital Planning Committee supports the project, he was concerned it would not offer financing because it hadn't gone through its typical process.

Board member Michael Bettencourt was not worried.

"I think historically we've always taken some capital projects out of the capital queue and pushed them forward," he said. "The [Capital Planning Committee] is really advisory to the town manager and the Select Board so I'm happy to move forward with the gym project."

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Bettencourt said he also understood the gym project has been talked about for a long time and he would like to see it move forward as quickly as possible.

But wait ...

While board members agreed to ask Town Meeting for free cash to cover the funding gap, Fallon said they might not have to. He said he's heard there are several groups in town that might like to contribute to the project and Nixon confirmed that.

Nixon said Arria has been working hard reaching out to a couple of different groups regarding donations and while nothing is official, he is hoping to see something come to fruition soon.

"A couple of individuals would just like to come see the gym in action like during a game to understand some of the issues first hand so Mark was more than happy to accommodate them," Nixon said, adding that until there is a formal commitment in regards to donations, he can't talk about who or how much money might be in play.

"But there seems to be some strong interest ... and if it were to come to pass it would certainly reduce and who knows maybe eliminate a free cash request from town meeting," he said.

Nixon also extended an invitation to anyone who wants to see first hand the problems and concerns with the gym.

"I see that as a positive," he said. "They just want to understand it better to support the project in the community and make a strong case for it."

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Rudolph was quick to point out, however, that the board would still have to go to Town Meeting for funding.

“Just to be clear, the overlay funds have to be voted at Town Meeting,” she said. “The ARPA funds don’t, but the overlay does.”

Next question

In an effort to jump start the project, Mucci asked his colleagues if they wanted to use $150,000 in ARPA funds to move ahead with design and construction documents. Nixon said they could probably get that done with $100,000.

“I see heads nodding so do you want to make a motion?” Mucci asked.

Board member Michelle Prior made the motion and it was unanimously approved.

What about the library?

Select Board member Anthea Brady asked if the gym was the only project under consideration. She reminded colleagues that Fallon and Prior were going to look to see if there were other potential projects, like the library windows, “just so we could have the full scope of things to look at.”

Rudolph said the library project is estimated to cost exactly $960,000, but it had just entered into the design phase and she expected updated cost figures by late March or April. She also said the intention for that project has been to have funds appropriated at the fall Town Meeting.

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Prior said it was helpful to know there is a plan for the library and said she appreciated Nixon's reality check concerning how the project came to be.

Next steps

The board will take a look at potentially putting a warrant article forward to fund another project at the high school, battens for the theater department. A batten is a pipe that spans the entire width of the stage to support and fly curtains, lighting and scenery.

Like the gym, Bettencourt said the project has been sitting around for a long time after it was dropped from the high school renovation project.

Nixon said they managed to keep the fly loft in the renovation plans, but while they have the capacity to fly up to 20 sets, they only have the ability to fly two. He likened it to putting an addition on your house, but never outfitting any of the rooms. The structure's there, but that's it.

Mucci suggested the possibility of using ARPA funds, but asked Bettencourt to come back with some more information and they'd take it up at the Feb. 26 meeting.

"It might be one of the few articles if we did have to put something, that we could actually have a demonstration at Town Meeting," Mucci added with a laugh. "I think Mike just volunteered to be flown in during Town Meeting to give the presentation."

"I'm in," Bettencourt said.

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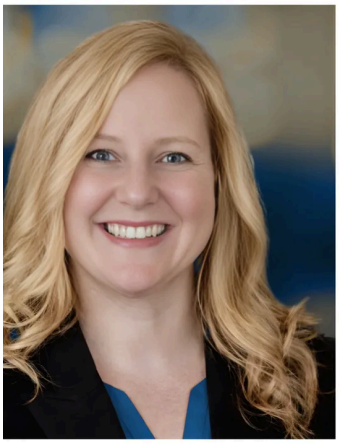

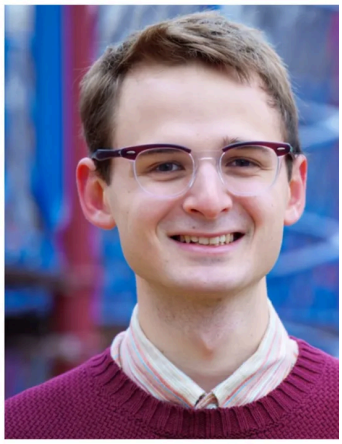

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